

STATE OF FLORIDA

Commissioners:  
JOE GARCIA, CHAIRMAN  
J. TERRY DEASON  
SUSAN F. CLARK  
JULIA L. JOHNSON  
E. LEON JACOBS, JR.



**DOCKET FILE COPY ORIGINAL**  
GENERAL COUNSEL  
ROBERT D. VANDIVER  
(850) 413-6248

**Public Service Commission**

August 4, 1999

**BY AIRBORNE EXPRESS**

Ms. Magalie Roman Salas  
Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th, SW - TW-A325  
Washington, DC 20554

**RECEIVED**  
**AUG 05 1999**  
**FCC MAIL ROOM**

Re: CC Docket No. 96-45 - Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service  
CC Docket No. 96-262 - Access Charge Reform

Dear Ms. Salas:

Enclosed please find the original and 12 copies of the Florida Public Service Commission Reply Comments in the above noted dockets. The summary starts on page 16. Please date stamp and return one copy in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

A copy on diskette is being provided to Sheryl Todd.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Cynthia B. Miller".

Cynthia B. Miller  
Intergovernmental Counsel

CBM:jmb

cc: Brad Ramsay  
Common Carrier Bureau  
International Transcription Service  
Sheryl Todd (with diskette)

Before the  
Federal Communications Commission  
Washington, D.C. 20554

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AUG 05 1999

FCC MAIL ROOM

In the Matter of:	)	
	)	
Federal-State Joint Board on	)	CC Docket No. 96-45
Universal Service	)	
	)	
Access Charge Reform	)	CC Docket No. 96-262

REPLY COMMENTS OF THE  
FLORIDA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION  
TO FURTHER NOTICE OF PROPOSED RULEMAKING  
ON IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

On May 27, 1999, the FCC adopted its Seventh Report and Order and Thirteenth Order on Reconsideration in its Universal Service docket. In the Order the FCC adopted principles for a federal universal service high-cost mechanism applicable to nonrural carriers that comport with the recommendations contained in the Joint Board's Second Recommended Decision. However, since the FCC believed that the record was insufficient to draw conclusions on certain aspects necessary to implement fully the new high-cost mechanism, they chose to issue a companion further notice of proposed rulemaking (FNPRM) to elicit comment on several specific implementation issues. The Florida Public Service Commission (FPSC) is pleased to submit the following comments in response to

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the FCC's FNPRM. These comments should not be construed to prejudice the ultimate development of any Florida intrastate universal service mechanism.

National Benchmark (§ 96-100); State's Ability to Support High-Cost Areas (§ 110-112)

In the Seventh Order the FCC adopted the Joint Board's recommendations to use a cost-based benchmark, instead of a revenue benchmark, when evaluating rate comparability. The determination of high-cost funding for nonrural LECs has now become a multi-step process. First, a given area's forward-looking cost estimates would be compared with a single national benchmark to ascertain whether the area's costs are significantly greater than the national average. In its Second Recommended Decision, the Joint Board recommended that the national benchmark be set at a level between 115 and 150 percent of the national weighted average forward-looking cost per line; the FCC seeks comment on where this benchmark should be established.

Second, a fixed per-line dollar amount is to be used as a measure of a state's ability to support its universal service needs internally. This per-line amount would be multiplied by the number

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of nonrural lines, and the result subtracted from the preliminary funding requirement amount from the first step. The FCC notes that in its May 1997 First Universal Service order, it had suggested a revenue benchmark of \$31 per month per line. It now seeks comment on whether it should set the assumed level of state support available to a nonrural LEC so that it equates to 3 to 6 percent of this \$31 figure; the FCC observes that an assumed \$2.00 per line is roughly 6 percent of \$31. (§ 111)

Third, the amount of federal support to be provided is either the result from the second step or the existing level of support, whichever is greater.

At the outset, the FPSC would note that absent our conducting an exhaustive evidentiary proceeding, we do not believe it appropriate for us to draw conclusions as to the FCC's universal service cost determinations. Moreover, since not all aspects of the cost methodology, including many of the inputs, have been finalized, such a review would not be productive. Consequently, we will limit our comments to more general principles that we believe the FCC should consider when finalizing its new high-cost funding methodology for nonrural LECs.

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The FPSC strongly agrees with the FCC's conclusion that existing competitive local market conditions do not warrant a significant increase over current levels in the amount of high-cost funding for local rates provided by the federal support mechanisms. (§ 69-70) In Florida we monitor on an ongoing basis the degree of local exchange competition present in our markets. Although the market share held by CLECs has risen gradually, we have seen no evidence that universal service has deteriorated in our state. Accordingly, we have suggested to our legislature a cautious approach when they consider establishing an intrastate explicitly funded universal service mechanism.

Similarly, the FPSC believes that for the present it would be reasonable to cap interstate high-cost funding provided to nonrural LECs at existing levels. This conclusion assumes that the extent of local exchange competition in the near term will not escalate dramatically. Only if and when rivalry in the local exchange market accelerates greatly and universal service is deemed at risk, should the required level of funding need to be revisited.

Capping the level of interstate funding in this manner also cleanly differentiates between sizing the fund and determining how

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distributions from the high-cost fund should be made. As discussed later in these comments, we believe that universal service funding should be targeted to those truly high-cost areas; the role of the cost analysis is to identify those areas which are candidates for funding. However, while the overall level of universal service funding inevitably must be limited in some fashion, we do not believe that such rationing should be performed in conjunction with the cost analysis.

Area Over Which Costs Should Be Averaged (§ 101-109)

The FCC notes that in its May 1997 Universal Service Order, it adopted the Joint Board's recommendation that forward-looking economic costs (FLEC) should be estimated at a level no higher than the wire center. However, in the Second Recommended Decision, the Joint Board has reconsidered its original recommendation and now proposes that federal support be based on costs measured over a much larger area, the study area level. While the Joint Board acknowledged that computing FLEC at the wire center level provides for support measurements at a more disaggregated basis, they concluded that support calculated at the study area is appropriate for the present, in light of the existing extent of local exchange

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competition. However, they observed that determining costs at a level below the study area may be warranted as local competition expands. (§ 101)

Accordingly, the FCC seeks comment as to the level at which forward-looking economic costs should be calculated for purposes of comparison with the national benchmark to yield federal support levels: at the wire center level, at the unbundled network element (UNE) cost zone level, or at the study area level. Notwithstanding the FCC's and the Joint Board's concerns with respect to establishing a high-cost fund for nonrural LECs that greatly exceeds current levels in light of the extremely modest extent of local competition today (a concern that we share), the FPSC believes that economic costs should be derived at the most disaggregated level at which reliable estimates can be made. As noted in the FNPRM (§ 103), such deaveraging allows for increased likelihood that support can be targeted to those subscribers residing in high-cost areas, and since such targeted support will be portable, it increases the likelihood that local exchange competitive entry will be more widespread, rather than limited solely to urban low-cost regions of the nation.

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Consequently, we do not endorse the calculation of costs at the study area level for purposes of determining federal support funding for nonrural carriers. A study area is synonymous with the service area of a LEC within a state; averaging costs at such a high level essentially precludes truly targeting support amounts. Moreover, if high-cost support is based on study area costs, then each line served within the study area could receive the same amount of per-line support. Since federal funding is to be portable, this could yield the anomalous result that CLECs receive high-cost federal funding for capturing and serving low-cost urban customers.

With respect to unbundled network element (UNE) cost zones, the FCC envisions that wire centers would be assigned to state-specified UNE cost zones, and each wire center within a cost zone would receive the same per-line level of support. It observes that use of UNE cost zones for high-cost funding may mitigate arbitrage opportunities relative to UNE rates. While the FPSC believes that use of UNE cost zones is preferable to cost averaging at the study area level, potential problems may arise in implementation. First, while the FCC's UNE deaveraging rule requires a minimum of three



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zones, in its Order staying this rule the FCC acknowledged that local, state-specific conditions may support fewer than (or more than) three UNE cost zones. If state-established UNE zones vary widely, there may be administrative difficulties in determining funding amounts. Second, there may be differences in terms of how the various states arrived at the cost estimates on which their UNE cost zones and rates are based. In addition to possible methodological differences between the states, there may be differences between the states' UNE costing approaches and the FCC's universal service costing model. We would also note that while the May 1997 universal service order provided for the option of states submitting cost studies on which their high-cost funding could be based, the FCC subsequently abandoned this approach, endorsing instead a single FLEC model to be applied nationwide. On balance, we believe that a single approach applied nationwide by the FCC to determine high-cost funding needs is most appropriate.

At ¶ 107, the FCC comes to the crux of the matter, where it seeks comment ". . . on ways to resolve the tension between the goal of preventing the fund from increasing significantly above current levels, and the goal of ensuring that support is, to the

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extent possible, directly targeted to high-cost areas within study areas." The FCC offers four proposals to resolve the conflict. The first option is to derive funding amounts by using the HCPM to compute costs at the study area, but then to re-run the model at the wire center level and use these results to target support to the high-cost wire centers within a given study area. Option two would compute costs and thus support at a level such as UNE zones or wire centers, but fund only an explicit percentage of the support indicated. Option three proposes to compute cost and support at UNE zones or wire centers, but caps the amount of support available to a given state at some percentage of the total fund. Option four again would compute costs and initial support at a detailed level such as UNE zones or wire centers, and then constrain the overall size of the fund "... by either raising the cost benchmark appropriately or adopting incremental funding levels for costs above the selected benchmark similar to the existing high-cost loop support mechanism." (§ 109)

As alluded to above, the FPSC believes that high-cost funding should first identify those areas which are truly high-cost and, second, determine from what sources funding should be made

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available, and the amount of such monies. If the FCC chooses to cap the overall amount of high-cost funds provided to nonrural LECs at its current level due to the absence of extensive local competition, the "tension" cited by the FCC is eliminated for the present. If the FCC opts not to freeze nonrural high-cost funding, we cannot endorse Option one, because by averaging costs at the study area, it has masked the bulk of all cost differences; moreover, this approach effectively first rations available support and then distributes it.

The FCC's Options two through four all appear to identify high-cost areas at the outset, and each implicitly constrains the size of the fund to some (unspecified) maximum amount. While Option three limits the maximum percentage of the fund any one state can receive, Option two (overall percentage cap) and Option four (choice of nationwide cost benchmark) limit the overall size of the fund. Although we believe it would be more straightforward to cap the fund, the FPSC believes either Option two or four can yield a fund that approximates the dollar amount of the existing fund. However, our initial reaction is not to support Option three, because it is doubtful that the distribution of high-cost

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areas between states is uniform. Intuitively, once the size of a fund has been established, it appears that a reasonable way to conduct distributions from the fund would be based upon relative costs. For example, one approach would be to rank order all qualifying wire centers by the amount per line per month that their costs exceeded the national benchmark, and make distributions from the fund starting with the highest cost wire center, until the fund is depleted. However, absent a "hold harmless" provision, while this approach should target the truly high-cost wire centers, it might result in undue disruptions in funding to certain companies or states.

Distribution and Application of Support (§ 113-116)

Given that the Act requires that recipients of federal universal service monies are to use this support "for the provision, maintenance, and upgrading of facilities and services for which the support is intended," the FCC seeks comment on what if any restrictions are needed in order to satisfy this requirement. One option proposed by the FCC is to treat federal support as carrier revenue subject to the intrastate rate setting process. The FCC observes that in states where rate of return

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regulation exists, federal funding would be applied against intrastate revenue requirements. Alternatively, the FCC notes that in states where price cap regulation exists, exogenous price cap adjustments could be made to reflect support received for high-cost areas. In Florida all three of our nonrural LECs are under price cap regulation in the intrastate jurisdiction. However, Florida's state law establishing price cap regulation does not provide for downward adjustments to the price caps. Thus, the FCC's tentative conclusion could not be implemented in Florida.

The FCC also offers its tentative conclusion that state oversight may not in all cases be sufficient to ensure that the requirements of Section 254(e) are met, and seeks comment on whether it would be appropriate to make receipt of federal high-cost universal service funds contingent on state actions, such as adjustments to local exchange tariffs to reflect federal support. Alternatively, in those states (such as Florida) that do not have the authority to mandate rate adjustments for certain carriers, the FCC proposes that a state commission could certify to the FCC that a carrier had properly accounted for federal support received in accord with the Act's requirements. The FPSC believes this latter

proposal might be viable so long as the onus was on a carrier to provide to the commission sufficient, reliable information to make such a certification. On balance, we believe that the best approach would be for the FCC to specify multiple options, any one of which would be deemed adequate to ensure that the Section 254(e) mandates had been satisfied.

Hold-Harmless and Portability of Support (§ 117-122)

¶ In the Seventh Order, the FCC adopted the Joint Board's proposal to incorporate a "hold-harmless" provision, in order to prevent precipitous decreases in federal high-cost funding when the revised mechanism is implemented. The FCC now seeks comment on whether a hold-harmless provision for nonrural LECs should be implemented on a state-by-state basis, or on a carrier-by-carrier basis.

If implemented on a state-by-state basis, no state would receive less federal support than it currently receives, but a given provider in the state might receive less funding. Alternatively, under a carrier-by-carrier approach, no individual carrier would receive less than it receives today. Of the two

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approaches, the carrier-by-carrier approach would tend to increase the overall fund size more.

Although Florida is one of the relatively few states with multiple nonrural LECs, the FPSC believes that if a hold-harmless provision is to be implemented, a state-by-state approach is preferable. As noted earlier in these comments, we believe that the first step in implementing a revised high-cost mechanism is to identify those truly high-cost areas, and second, to determine what portion of these high-cost areas should receive funding (equivalently, size the fund). The effect of implementing a carrier-by-carrier hold-harmless provision is to add a third step that only further ratchets up the fund size. Moreover, such an approach casts doubt on whether it is consistent with the Joint Board's and the FCC's earlier determination that the current extent of local competition implies that a federal high-cost fund not significantly greater than the current fund is appropriate.

If a state-by-state hold-harmless provision is adopted, the FCC seeks comment on how to apportion hold-harmless support where the total amount of hold-harmless support available to a state is not adequate to hold all carriers harmless. The FCC proposes to

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allocate the available hold-harmless monies pro rata among those carriers who will experience a shortfall relative to current funding received. (§ 120) We believe this approach is reasonable and recommend its implementation.

The FCC also asks for comment on the relationship between the hold-harmless provision and portability of high-cost support. Specifically, where a CLEC wins a customer from an ILEC receiving hold-harmless support, the FCC asks whether the CLEC should receive the hold-harmless support, or just the support based on the forward-looking cost mechanism received by the ILEC for serving the area. (§ 122) Although we acknowledge that the purpose of the hold-harmless provision was to prevent rate increases by carriers who had become dependent on their current support amount, nevertheless the hold-harmless amount is equally a subsidy, ultimately paid for by other ratepayers, and it too should go to the carrier that serves the high-cost customer.

FCC's Repudiation of the 25% / 75% Mechanism

The FPSC commends the FCC for repudiating its jurisdictional framework of the 25% / 75% mechanism which appeared in the earlier universal service order, which would have capped federal high-cost



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funds at a maximum of 25% of the difference between forward-looking economic cost and a revenue benchmark. Telling carriers to obtain the remaining 75% of the necessary high-cost funds from intrastate sources would intrude on state authority. In accord with the Joint Board's Second Recommended Decision, the FCC's Seventh Order instead states that, to the extent a state's resources are deemed inadequate to maintain affordable and reasonably comparable rates, the federal mechanism will provide additional necessary support if required.

Summary

The FPSC generally agrees with the Joint Board and the FCC that existing competitive local market conditions do not warrant a significant increase over current levels in the amount of high-cost funding for local rates provided by the federal support mechanisms. However, our conclusion is predicated on the assumption that the local exchange market competition will approximate current levels. Further, the absence of extensive local exchange competition leads the FPSC to believe that it would be reasonable to cap the amount of interstate high-cost funding provided to nonrural LECs at existing levels.

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In order to target high-cost funding, the FPSC believes that economic costs should be derived at the most disaggregated level where reasonable estimates can be made. We do not endorse the calculation of costs at the study area level, as a means of limiting the overall size of the fund. The FPSC believes that the use of UNE price zones is preferable to cost averaging at the study level but potential conflicts may arise in implementation by the states, and the FCC's desire for a single nationwide approach.

If the FCC opts not to cap nonrural funding for the present, of the four options proposed by the FCC to prevent the fund from increasing significantly from current levels while ensuring support is targeted toward high-cost study areas, the FPSC cannot support option one (study area cost averaging), believes that either options two (fund an explicit percentage of indicated support) or four (limit fund size by increasing benchmark or using incremental funding levels) can reasonably limit the size of the desired fund, and does not endorse option three (limiting each state's amount of support at some percentage of the total fund)


Since circumstances can vary widely between states and between providers' regulatory treatment within a state, we believe that the

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best approach would be for the FCC to identify an array of acceptable options, any one of which would be adequate to comply with the mandates of Section 254(e).

If the FCC chooses to implement a "hold-harmless" provision, the FPSC believes that a state-by-state approach should be implemented, and that hold-harmless monies should be allocated pro rata among carriers that will experience a shortfall relevant to their current funding. implemented. Further, we believe that when a CLEC wins a customer from an ILEC that receives hold-harmless support, the carrier that serves the high-cost customer should receive the hold-harmless amount.

Respectfully submitted,

  
CYNTHIA B. MILLER  
Intergovernmental Counsel

FLORIDA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION  
2540 Shumard Oak Boulevard  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0850

DATED: August 4, 1999


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Before the  
Federal Communications Commission  
Washington, D.C. 20554

In the Matter of:	)	
	)	
Federal-State Joint Board on	)	CC Docket No. 96-45
Universal Service	)	
	)	
Access Charge Reform	)	CC Docket No. 96-262

**CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I HEREBY CERTIFY that a true and correct copy of the foregoing Reply Comments of the Florida Public Service Commission will be sent to the attached list of parties by the 5th day of August, 1999.

  
CYNTHIA B. MILLER

Intergovernmental Counsel

The Honorable Susan Ness, Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N.W. - Room 832  
Washington, D.C. 20554

The Honorable Kenneth McClure  
Vice Chairman  
Missouri Public Service Commission  
301 W. High Street, Suite 530  
Jefferson City, MO 65102

The Honorable Laska Schoenfelder,  
Commissioner  
South Dakota Public Utilities Commission  
500 E. Capital Avenue  
Pierre, SD 57501

Whiting Thayer  
Federal Communications Commission  
200 L Street, N.W., Suite 812  
Washington, D.C. 20036

The Honorable Sharon L. Nelson, Chairman  
Washington Utilities and Transportation  
Commission  
P. O. Box 47250  
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

Martha S. Hogerty  
Public Counsel for the State of Missouri  
P. O. Box 7800  
Harry S. Truman Building, Room 250  
Jefferson City, MO 65102

The Honorable Rachelle B. Chong,  
Commissioner  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N. W., Room 844  
Washington, D.C. 20054

Alex Belinfante  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N. W.  
Washington, D.C. 20054

Paul R. Pederson, State Staff Chair  
Missouri Public Service Commission  
P. O. Box 360  
Truman State Office Building  
Jefferson City, MO 65102

Eileen Benner  
Idaho Public Utilities Commission  
P. O. Box 83720  
Boise, ID 83720-0074

William Howden  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 812  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Debra M. Kriete  
Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission  
P. O. Box 3265  
Harrisburg, PA 17105-3265

Larry Povich  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N. W.  
Washington, D.C. 20054

Deborah Dupont, Federal Staff Chair  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Charles Bolle  
South Dakota Public Utilities Commission  
State Capital, 500 E. Capital Avenue  
Pierre, SD 57501-5070

Lorraine Kenyon  
Alaska Public Utilities Commission  
1016 West Sixth Avenue, Suite 400  
Anchorage, AK 99501

Clara Kuehn  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

The Honorable Sandra Makeeff  
Iowa Utilities Board  
Lucas State Office Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Michael A. McRae  
D.C. Office of the People's Counsel  
1133 15th Street, N.W., Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Terry Monroe  
New York Public Service Commission  
Three Empire Plaza  
Albany, NY 12223

Mark Nadel  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N. W.  
Washington, D.C. 20054

The Honorable Samuel Loudenslager  
Arkansas Public Service Commission  
P. O. Box 400  
Little Rock, AR 72203-0400

Philip F. McClelland  
Pennsylvania Office of Consumer Advocate  
1425 Strawberry Square  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Rafi Mohammed  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 812  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Andrew Mulitz  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Gary Oddi  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Teresa Pitts  
Washington Utilities & Transportation  
Commission  
P. O. Box 47250  
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

James Bradford Ramsay  
National Association of Regulatory Utility  
Commissioners  
1201 Constitution Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20423

Brian Roberts  
California Public Utilities Commission  
505 Van Nes Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94102-3298

Pamela Szymczak  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Richard J. Johnson, Brian T. Grogan  
Minnesota Independent Coalition  
Moss & Barnett  
4800 Northwest Center  
90 South Seventh Street  
Minneapolis, MN 55402-4129

Jeanine Poltronieri  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Jonathan Reel  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Gary Seigel  
Federal Communications Commission  
2000 L Street, N. W., Suite 257  
Washington, D.C. 20036

James Blaszak, Kevin S. DiLallo  
AD HOC Telecommunications Users  
Levine, Blaszak, Block & Boothby  
1300 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Angela J. Campbell, Ilene R. Penn, John  
Podesta  
Institute for Public Representation  
Georgetown University Law Center  
600 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Robert S. Tongren, Andrea M. Kelsey, David  
C. Bergmann, Richard W. Pace  
Office of the Ohio Consumer's Counsel  
77 South High Street, 15th Floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0550

David A. Irwin  
ITCs, Inc.  
Irwin, Campbell & Tannenwald, P.C.  
1730 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

William H. Smith, Jr., Chief  
Bureau Rate & Safety Evaluation  
Iowa Utilities Board  
Lucas State Office Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dr. Barbara O'Connor, Mary Gardiner Jones,  
Henry Geller, Samuel A. Simon  
Alliance for Public Technology  
901 15th Street, Suite 230  
Washington, D.C. 20005



Ray Taylor, President  
Association of Community College Trustees  
One Dupont Circle, N.W.  
Suite 410  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Kenneth Lein, Manager  
Winnebago Cooperative Telephone  
Association  
704 East Main  
Lake Mills, Iowa 50450

Charles H. Helein  
America's Carriers Telecommunication Assn  
Helein & Associates, P.C.  
8180 Greensboro Drive, Suite 70  
McClellan, Virginia 22101

Charles H. Carrathurs III  
Richard D. Gary  
Virginia Rural Telephone Companies  
Hunton & Williams  
951 East Byrd Street  
Richmond, VA 23219

Honorable Albert Vann  
National Black Caucus of State Legislators  
Telecommunications & Energy Committee  
New York State Assembly  
Legislative Office Building #422  
Albany, New York 12248

National Association of Development  
Organizations  
444 North Capitol Street, N.W.  
Suite 630  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Paul Rodgers, Charles D. Gray  
National Association of Regulatory Utility  
Commissioners  
1201 Constitution Avenue, Suite 1102  
P. O. Box 684  
Washington, D.C. 20044

Illona A. Jeffcoat-Sacco, Director  
Public Utilities Division  
State of North Dakota  
600 E. Boulevard  
Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0480

Michael J. Nowick  
Executive Secretary/Treasurer  
Minnesota Telephone Association  
1650 World Trade Center  
30 East 7th Street  
St. Paul, MN 55101-4901

Alison M. Hughes, MPA  
Associate Director  
University of Arizona  
Health Sciences Center  
2501 East Elm Street  
Tucson, Arizona 85716

Marc A. Stone  
Manager-Regulatory/Legislative Affairs  
Fred Williamson & Associates, Inc.  
2921 East 91st Street, Suite 200  
Tulsa, Oklahoma 74137

Virginia J. Taylor, Richard A. Elbrecht  
California Department of Consumer Affairs  
400 R Street, Suite 3090  
Sacramento, CA 95814-6200

Michael Casserly, Executive Director  
Council of the Great City Schools  
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 702  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Margot Smiley Humphrey  
Century Telephone Enterprises, Inc. and  
TDS Telecommunications Corporation  
Koteen & Naftalin  
1150 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 1000  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Ronald L. Plesser, James H. Halpert,  
Mark J. O'Connor  
Commercial Internet Exchange Association  
Piper & Marbury L.L.P.  
1200 19th Street, N.W., Seventh Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Michael S. Fox  
Director-Regulatory Affairs  
John Staurulakis, Inc.  
Telecommunications Consultants  
6315 Seabrook Road  
Seabrook, Maryland 20706

Margot Smiley Humphrey  
NRTA  
Koteen & Naftalin, LLP  
1150 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 1000  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Joseph P. Markoski, James M. Finkl  
Information Technology Association  
of America  
Electronic Messaging Association  
Squire, Sanders & Dempsey  
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
P. O. Box 407  
Washington, D. C. 20044

Mark J. Golden  
Vice President - Industry Affairs  
Robert R. Cohen  
Personal Communications Industry  
Association  
500 Montgomery Street, Suite 700  
Alexandria, VA 22314-1561

Jeffery L. Sheldon, Sean A. Stokes  
UTC  
1140 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 1140  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Jeffery H. Smith  
Keystone-Arthur Telephone Company  
P. O. Box 240  
Keyston, Nebraska 69144

Philip L. Verveer, Sue D. Blumenfeld,  
Thomas Jones  
Tele-Communications, Inc.  
Willkie Farr & Gallagher  
Three LaFayette Centre  
1155 21st Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Robert M. Halperin  
The State of Alaska  
Crowell & Moring  
1001 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dale White  
Commercial Services Manager  
Churchill County Telephone & Telegraph  
P. O. Box 1390  
50 West Williams Avenue  
Fallon, Nevada 89406

Deborah S. Waldbaum  
Colorado Office of Consumer Counsel  
1580 Logan Street, Suite 610  
Denver, Colorado 80203

Rachel B. Ferber  
Vice President-Assistant General Counsel  
360 Communications Company  
8725 Higgins Road  
Chicago, IL 60631

J. Kent Jerome  
Secretary-Treasurer  
Iowa Telephone Association  
1601 - 22 Street, Suite 290  
West Des Moines, Iowa 50266

L. Jerry Mitchell  
Mon-Cre Telephone Cooperative  
Jackson Thornton & Company, CPAs  
P. O. Box 96  
Montgomery, AL 36101-0096

R. Glenn Rhyne, Manager  
Research Department  
State of South Carolina  
Public Service Commission  
P. O. Drawer 11649  
Columbia, S.C. 29203

Kathryn Marie Krause  
U.S. West, Inc.  
1020 19th Street, N.W.  
Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Randolph J. May, Timothy J. Cooney  
Compuserve Incorporated  
Sutherland, Asbill & Brenna  
1275 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20004-2404

L. Jerry Mitchell  
Bledsoe Telephone Cooperative  
Jackson Thornton & Company, CPAs  
P. O. Box 96  
Montgomery, AL 36101-0096

Benjamin Peres, Gerald M. Zuckerman, Mark  
J. Becker  
Hispanic Information and  
Telecommunications Network, Inc.  
Abacus Communications Company  
1801 Columbia Road, N.W., Suite 101  
Washington, D.C. 20009

Chris Frentrup  
MCI Telecommunications Corporation  
1801 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Robert D. Carlitz,  
Eugene F. Hastings, II, Mario Zinga,  
Information Renaissance  
c/o Anthony P. Picadio  
600 Grant Street, Suite 4680  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

James R. Hobson  
National Emergency Number Association  
Donelan, Cleary, Wood & Maser, P.C.  
1100 New York Avenue, N.W., Suite 750  
Washington, D.C. 20005-3934

Mary Ellen Emmons, President  
The Alaska Library Association  
P. O. Box 81084  
Fairbanks, Alaska 99708

David J. Strom  
American Federation of Teachers  
555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Lee Green, RN  
Clinical Coordinator  
High Plains Rural Health Network  
218 East Kiowa Avenue  
P. O. Box 575  
Ft. Morgan, Colorado 80701

Alfred M. Mamlet, Marc A. Paul  
Kinko's Inc.  
Steptoe & Johnson Llt  
1330 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Cheryl A. Tritt, James A. Casey  
Cheyenne River Sioux Telephone Authority  
2000 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.  
Suite 5500  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Henry M. Rivera, Larry S. Solomon  
J. Thomas Nolan  
Metricom, Inc.  
Ginsburg, Feldman and Bress, Chartered  
1250 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

William H. Smith, Jr., Chief  
Bureau Rate & Safety Evaluation  
Iowa Utilities Board  
Lucas State Office Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Richard M. Tettelbaum  
Associate General Counsel  
Citizens Utilities Company  
1400 16th Street, N.W., Suite 500  
Washington, D. C. 20036

Judith St. Ledger-Roty  
Stefan M. Lopatkiewicz  
Reed Smith Shaw & McClay  
1301 K Street, N.W., East Tower  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Mark C. Rosenblum, Peter H. Jacoby,  
Judy Sello  
AT&T Corporation  
Room 3244J1  
295 North Maple Avenue  
Basking Ridge, N.J. 07920

Robert G. Pennington, Program Director  
Mountaineer Doctor Tele Vision-MDTV  
Robert C. Byrd  
Health Sciences Center  
West Virginia University  
Morgantown, WV 26506

Earl TIC. Gutierrez  
Governor of Guam  
Office of the Governor  
P. O. Box 2950  
Agana, Guam 96910

Richard A. Muscat, Dan Morales,  
Jorge Vega, Thomas P. Perkins, Jr.,  
Rupaco T. Gonzalex  
Public Agency Representation Section  
P. O. Box 12548, Capitol Station  
Austin, TX 78711-2548

Delbert D. Smith, Stefan M. Lopatkiewicz,  
Brigitte L. Adams  
U.S. Distance Learning Association  
Reed Smith Shaw & McClay  
1301 K Street, N.W., East Tower  
Washington, D.C. 20005

J. Manning Lee  
Vice President, Regulatory Affairs  
Teleport Communications Group, Inc.  
Two Teleport Drive, Suite 300  
Staten Island, New York 10311

Philip L. Verveer, Brian A. Finley  
Guam Public Utilities Commission  
Willkie Farr & Gallagher  
Three Lafayette Centre  
1155 21st Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Gene P. Belardi, Vice President  
MobileMedia Communications, Inc.  
2101 Wilson Blvd., Suite 935  
Arlington, VA 22201

Mary E. Newmeyer  
Federal Affairs Advisor  
Alabama Public Service Commission  
P. O. Box 991  
Montgomery, AL 36101

John H. Gengler  
Principal  
Richardton-Taylor High School  
Richardton, ND 58652

Michael T. Skrivan  
Harris, Skrivan & Associates, LLC  
8801 S. Yale, Suite 220  
Tulsa, OK 74137

Cheryl L. Parino, Chairman  
Public Service Commission of Wisconsin  
610 North Whitney Way  
P. O. Box 7854  
Madison, WI 53707-7854

Lawrence W. Katz  
Bell Atlantic Telephone Companies  
1320 North Court House Road  
Eighth Floor  
Arlington, VA 22201

Howard J. Symons, Jennifer A. Purvis  
Continental Cablevision, Inc.  
Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and  
Pope, P.C.  
701 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.,  
Suite 900  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Jeffery P. Johnson  
Deputy State Librarian  
Library of Michigan  
717 W. Allegan Street  
Lansing, MI 48909

Robert A. Hart IV  
Hart Engineers  
4615 North Blvd.  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70806

Jeffery Blumenfeld, Glenn B. Manishin,  
Christy C. Kunin,  
Christine A. Mailloux  
Netscape Communications Corporation  
1615 M Street, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Tom Udall, Richard Weiner  
New Mexico Attorney General  
P. O. Drawer 1508  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504

Rich Gross  
Instructional Telecommunications  
Council  
RDR Associates, Inc.  
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 410  
Washington, D.C. 20036

L. Jerry Mitchell  
New Hope Telephone Cooperative  
Ragland Telephone Company  
Hopper Telecommunications Company  
Jackson Thornton & Company, CPAs  
P. O. Box 96  
Montgomery, AL 36101-0096

Donald L. Howell, II  
Deputy Attorney General  
Idaho Public Utilities Commission  
P. O. Box 83720  
Boise, ID 83720-0074

Jere W. Glover, Chief Counsel  
David W. Zesiger, Asst. Chief Counsel  
Office of Advocacy  
U.S. Small Business Administration  
409 Third Street, S.W., Suite 7800  
Washington, D.C. 20416

Thomas K. Crowe, Michael B. Adams, Jr.  
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana  
Islands  
Law Office of Thomas K. Crowe, P.C.  
2300 M Street, N.W., Suite 800  
Washington, D.C. 30027

Jeffery C. Ogden  
Merit Associate Director for MichNet  
4251 Plymouth Road  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48105-2785

Joseph S. Paykel, Andrew Jay Schwartzman,  
Gigi B. Sohn, Jill A. Lesser  
People for the American Way  
2000 M Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

David W. McGann  
Special Assistant Attorney General  
Illinois Commerce Commission  
160 North LaSalle Street  
Chicago, IL 60601

John C. Beachboard, Charles R. McClure,  
Kristin R. Eschenfelder  
School of Information Studies  
Syracuse University  
4-116 Center for Science & Technology  
Syracuse, New York 13244-4100

Jeffery F. Beck  
Jillisa Bronfman  
Beck & Ackerman  
Four Embarcadero Center, Suite 760  
San Francisco, CA 94111

John E. Cawthorne  
Vice President for Education  
National Urban League  
106 Campion Hall  
Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02146

Kathleen Q. Abernathy  
David A. Gross  
Airtouch Communications, Inc.  
1818 N Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Mark D. Wilkerson  
Alabama-Mississippi Telephone  
Association  
Brantley & Wilkerson, P.C.  
P. O. Box 830  
Montgomery, AL 36101-0830

David R. Poe, Yvonne M. Coviello  
Time Warner Communications Holdings, Inc.  
LeBoeuf, Lamb, Green & MacRae L.L.P.  
1875 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 1200  
Washington, D.C. 20009

Jay C. Keithley, Leon M. Kestenbaum  
H. Richard Juhnke  
Sprint Corporation  
1850 M Street, N.W., Suite 1100  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Harold M. Thompson  
Chief Operating Officer  
Iowa Communications Network  
P. O. Box 587  
Johnston, Iowa 50131-0587

Catherine R. Sloan,  
Richard L. Fruchterman,  
Richard S. Whitt  
Worldcom, Inc.  
d/b/a LDDS WorldCom  
1120 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20036



David F. Johnson, Scott Sawyer  
State of Rhode Island and  
Providence Plantations  
Public Utilities Commission  
100 Orange Street  
Providence, R.I. 02903

Michael C. Strant, Executive Vice-President  
and General Counsel  
Montana Independent Telecommunications  
Systems, Inc.  
519 North Sanders  
Helena, Montana 59604-5237

Martin Avery  
Executive Director  
Navajo Nation Washington Office  
1101 17th Street, N.W., Suite 250  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Mary Dent  
Goldberg, Godles, Wiener & Wright  
1229 Nineteenth Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Timothy R. Graham, Roger M. Brger,  
Joseph M. Sandri, Jr.  
Winstar Communications, Inc.  
1146 19th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Michael F. Altschul, V.P., General Counsel  
Randall S. Coleman, V.P.  
Regulatory Policy & Law  
Cellular Telecommunications Industry  
Association  
1250 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 200  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Gary M. Epstein, Teresa D. Baer,  
Michael S. Wroblewski  
Pacific Telecom, Inc.  
Latham & Watkins  
1001 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 1300  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Richard Civile, Dr. Ann Bishop,  
Dr. Leigh Estabrook  
Graduate School of Library  
and Information Science  
University of Illinois at Urban/Champaign  
501 East Daniel Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

James Rowe  
Executive Director  
Alaska Telephone Association  
4341 B Street, Suite 304  
Anchorage, AK 99503

Fiona Branton  
Director of Government Relations  
and Regulatory Counsel  
Information Technology Industry Council  
1250 Eye Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Brian R. Moir  
International Communications Association  
Moir & Hardman  
2000 L Street, N.W., Suite 512  
Washington, D.C. 20036-4907

Mel Engel, Bruce D. Jacobs,  
Jason S. Roberts  
Wavephore, Inc.  
Fisher Wayland Cooper Leader & Zaragoza  
L.L.P.  
2001 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. - Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Ronald L. Plessner, James J. Halpert  
Mark J. O'Connor  
Commercial Internet Exchange Assoc.  
Piper & Marbury L.L.P.  
1200 19th Street, NW, Seventh Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Lon C. Levin  
Vice President and Regulatory Counsel  
AMSC Subsidiary Corporation  
10802 Park Ridge Blvd.  
Reston, VA 22091

P. Kenneth Komoski  
The Linct Coalition  
466 Pleasant Street  
Melrose, MA 02176-4522

Lucille M. Mates, Jeffery B. Thomas  
Pacific Bell, Nevada Bell  
140 New Montgomery Street  
Room 1522A  
San Francisco, CA 94105

Alison M. Hughes, MPA  
Associate Director  
University of Arizona  
Health Sciences Center  
2501 East Elm Street  
Tucson, Arizona 85716

Edward C. Addison, Director  
Division of Communications  
Virginia State Corporation Commission  
1300 East Main Street - 9th Floor  
P. O. Box 1197  
Richmond, VA 23218

Jeffery F. Beck  
Jillisa Bronfman  
Beck & Ackerman  
Fourth Embarcadero Center, Suite 760  
San Francisco, CA 94111

Joe Dudick  
Executive Directory  
Pennsylvania Rural Development Council  
Room 506 Finance Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Ted Schultz  
Vice President for Administrative Services  
Nebraska Association of Hospitals  
and Health Systems  
1640 L Street, Suite D  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68508-2509

Paul Hoff  
General Manager/CEO  
Park Region Mutual Telephone Co.  
Underwood, Minnesota 56586

Karen Finstad Hammel  
Staff Attorney  
Montana Public Service Commission  
1701 Prospect Avenue  
P. O. Box 202601  
Helena, MT 59601-2601

Charles C. Curtis, V.P., Strategic  
Planning  
Cathy J. Quinn, Gen.Mgr,  
Regulatory Affairs  
Associated Communicants & Research  
Services, Inc.  
817 N.E. 63rd Street  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

Robert C. Maier, Paul J. Kissman  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Board of Library Commissioners  
648 Beacon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

William J. Janklow, Governor  
State of South Dakota  
Executive Office - State Capitol  
500 East Capitol  
Pierre, South Dakota 57501-5070

Jim Williams, Executive Director  
FarNet  
Washington Office  
1112 16th Street, N.W., Suite 600  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Kenneth Stofferahn, Chairman  
James A. Burg, Vice Chairman  
South Dakota Public Utilities Commission  
500 East Capitol Avenue  
Pierre, SD 57501

Norman D. Rasmussen  
Executive Vice President  
Colorado Independent Telephone  
Association, Inc.  
3236 Hiwan Drive  
Evergreen, Colorado 80439

Allen P. Stayman  
Director - Office of Insular Affairs  
United States Department of the Interior  
Office of the Secretary  
Washington, D.C. 20240

Lawrence C. St. Branc, Secretary  
Gayle T. Kellner  
Louisiana Public Service Commission  
P. O. Box 91154  
Baton Rouge, LA 70821-9154

Mark Savage, Stefan Rosenzweig  
Carmela Castellano  
Public Advocates, Inc.  
1535 Mission Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103

Marilyn Mohrman-Gillis, Vice President  
Policy & Legal Affairs  
Lonna M. Thompson, Director  
Legal Affairs  
Association of America's Public  
Television Stations  
1350 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 200  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Kweisi Mufume  
President/CEO  
National Association for the Advancement  
of Colored People  
4805 Mt. Hope Drive  
Baltimore, MD 21215-3297

Paul W. Schroeder  
National Program Associate in  
Technology and Telecommunications  
American Foundation for the Blind  
401 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 308  
Chicago, IL 60611

Thomas E. Sheldon  
Executive Deputy Commissioner  
New York State Education Department  
Albany, New York 12234

Randy Zach  
TCA, Inc.  
3617 Betty Drive  
Suite I  
Colorado Springs, CO 80917

Suzi Ray McClellan, Laurie Pappas  
Texas Office of Public Utility Counsel  
Post Office Box 13326  
Austin, TX 78711-3326

Peter Arth, Jr., Edward W. O'Neil,  
Mary Mack Adu  
People of the State of California  
Public Utilities Commission  
State of California  
505 Van Ness Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Robert F. Manifold  
Assistant Attorney General  
National Association of State Utility  
Consumer Advocates (NASUCA)  
900 4th Avenue, Suite 2000  
Seattle, WA 98164

Steve Ellenbecker, Chairman  
Doug Dougherty, Deputy Chairman  
Kristin H. Lee, Commissioner  
Wyoming Public Service Commission  
700 West 21st Street  
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002

Alfred M. Mamlet, Philip L. Malet,  
Marc A. Paul  
Telefonica Larga Distancia  
De Puerto Rico, Inc.  
Steptoe & Johnson L.L.P.  
1330 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Joe D. Edge  
Richard J. Arsenault  
Puerto Rico Telephone Company  
Drinker Biddle & Reath  
901 Fifteenth Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Don Schroer, Chairman  
Alaska Public Utilities Commission  
1016 West Sixth Avenue  
Suite 400  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-1963

Joel B. Shifman, Esq.  
Maine Public Utilities Commission  
242 State Street, State House Station No.  
18  
Augusta, Maine 04333-0018

Maureen O. Helmer  
General Counsel  
New York State Department of Public  
Service  
Three Empire State Plaza  
Albany, New York 1223-1350

Dena S. Puskin, Sc.D.  
Deputy Directory  
Office of Rural Health Policy  
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 9-05  
Rockville, MD 20857

Boyd D. Spiker, C.E.O.  
Rock Port Telephone Company  
P. O. Box 147  
107 Opp Street  
Rock Port, MO 64482

O. Lee Darrington  
Rhonda R. Maun  
TELEC Consulting Resources, Inc.  
909 North 98th Street, Suite 203  
Omaha, Nebraska 68114-2508

B. Robert Piller, Executive Director  
Gerald A. Norlander, Deputy Director  
Public Utility Law Project  
of New York, Inc.  
90 State Street, #601  
Albany, New York 12207-1715

G.R. Evans  
NYNEX Government Affairs  
1300 I Street, N.W.  
Suite 400 West  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Terry D. Blackwood  
Billy Jack Gregg  
West Virginia Consumer Advocate  
700 Union Building  
Charleston, West Virginia 25301

Elizabeth A. Noel  
Sandra Mattavous-Frye  
Office of the People's Counsel  
District of Columbia  
1133 15th Street, N.W., Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20005-2710

J. Scott Searl  
Baird, Holm, McEachen, Pedersen,  
Hamann & Strasheim  
1500 Woodmen Tower  
Omaha, Nebraska 68102

John G. Strand, Chairman  
John C. Shea, Commissioner  
David A. Svanda, Commissioner  
State of Michigan  
Department of Commerce  
6545 Mercantile Way  
P. O. Box 30221  
Lansing, Michigan 48909-7721

David Cosson, L. Marie Guillory,  
Steve Watkins  
NTCA  
2626 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037

Lisa M. Zaina, Ken Johnson  
OPASTCO  
21 Dupont Circle, N.W.  
Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036

L. Jerry Mitchell  
Farmers Telephone Cooperative  
Blountsville Telephone Company  
Ardmore Telephone Co.  
Jackson & Co., CPA  
P. O. Box 96  
Montgomery, AL 36101

Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission  
Suite E-306  
302 W. Washington Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46204

New Jersey Board of Public Utilities  
Two Gateway Center  
Newark, N.J. 07102

Morton Bahr  
Communications Workers of America  
Suite 1102  
501 3rd Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Stuart Blake, Vice President  
& General Counsel  
Sharon Adele Bohamed, Manager,  
Corporate Legal Compliance  
Kinko's, Inc.  
World Headquarters  
255 West Stanley Avenue  
Ventura, CA 930002-800v

David A. Beckett  
Colorado Public Utilities Commission  
1580 Logan Street  
Office Level 2  
Denver, CO 80203

Oklahoma Corporation Commission  
P. O. Box 5200-2000  
Oklahoma City, OK 73152-2000

David M. Ross  
Association of the Bar,  
City of New York  
Administrative Law Committee  
44 Beaver Street  
New York, N.Y. 10004

Gayle T. Kellner  
Louisiana Public Service Commission  
P. O. Box 91154  
Baton Rouge, LA 70821-9154

Joseph A. Spagnolo  
State Superintendent of Education  
Illinois State Board of Education  
100 North First Street  
Springfield, IL 62777-0001

Nancy Zussy  
State Librarian  
Washington State Library  
P. O. Box 42460  
Olympia, WA 98504-2460

Brad E. Mutschelknaus  
Steven A. Augustino  
Kelley Drye & Warren  
1200 Nineteenth Street, N.W.  
Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dr. Barbara O'Connor  
Mary Gardiner Jones  
Alliance for Public Technology  
901 15th Street, Suite 230  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Ellis Jacobs  
Council for the Edgemont  
Neighborhood Coalition  
Legal Aid Society of Dayton  
333 West First Street, Suite 500  
Dayton, OH 45402

National Association of Development  
Organizations  
444 North Capitol Street, N.W.  
Suite 630  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Hon. Albert Vann, Member  
New York State Assembly  
Legislative Office Building #422  
Albany, New York 12248

Charles H. Carrthers III  
Richard D. Gary  
Virginia's Rural Telephone Companies  
951 East Byrd Street  
Richmond, VA 23219

Charles H. Helein  
America's Carriers Telecommunication  
Association  
Helein & Associates, P.C.  
8180 Greensboro Drive  
Suite 700  
McLean, VA 22102

Robert S. Tongren, Andrea M. Kelsey,  
David C. Bergman, Richard W. Pace,  
Karen J. Hardie  
Ohio Consumers Counsel  
77 South High Street, 15th Floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0550

Richard B. Bulman  
Senior Vice President  
Rural Telephone Cooperative  
2201 Cooperative Way  
Herndon, VA 22071

Veronica M. Ahern  
Guam Telephone Authority  
Nixon, Hargrave, Devans & Doyle LLP  
One Thomas Circle  
Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Jewell Elliott, Angela J. Campbell, Illeen  
R. Penn, John Podesta  
Institute for Public Representation  
Georgetown University Law Center  
600 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Jay Sanders, M.D.  
President  
American Telemedicine Association  
901 - 15th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036



Bonnie Price  
7027 Haverhill Park Road  
Whittier, CA 90602

Kevin J. Donnellan, Acting Director,  
Legislation and Public Policy  
Bradley C. Stillman, Director,  
Telecommunications Policy  
American Association of Retired Persons  
601 E Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20049

W. Kenneth Ferree  
Henry Goldberg  
OPTEL, Inc.  
Goldberg, Godles, Wiener & Wright  
1229 Nineteenth Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Kevin Starr  
State Librarian of California  
P. O. Box 942837  
Sacramento, CA 94237-001

Dr. Stanley Gardner  
Barbara Reading  
Missouri State Library  
P. O. Box 387  
Jefferson City, MO 65102

Raymond G. Bender, Jr.  
J.G. Harrington  
Vanguard Cellular Systems, Inc.  
Dow, Lohnes & Albertson  
1200 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 800  
Washington, D.C. 20037

Richard J. Metzger  
Emily M. Williams  
Association for Local  
Telecommunications Service  
1200 19th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Wayne A. Leighton, Ph. D.  
James L. Gattuso  
Citizens for a Sound Economy Foundation  
1250 H Street, N.W., Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dr. William J. Tobin  
Executive Director  
Early Childhood Development Center  
Legislative Coalition  
3612 Bent Branch Court  
Falls Church, VA 22041

Kevin Taglang  
Benton Foundation  
1634 Eye Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Vicki Oswalt  
Director-Office of Policy Development  
Public Utility Commission of Texas  
Post Office Box 13326  
Austin, TX 78711-3326

Ronald A. Gagnon  
Executive Director  
North of Boston Library Exchange, Inc.  
26 Cherry Hill Drive  
Danvers, MA 01923

Roberta Ward, Coordinator  
Distance Delivery Consortium  
P. O. Box 2401  
Bethel, Alaska 99559

Robert Bocher, Technology Consultant  
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
State of Wisconsin  
P. O. Box 7841  
Madison, WI 53707-7841

Mary McDermott, Linda Kent,  
Charles D. Cosson  
United States Telephone Association  
1401 H Street, N.W., Suite 600  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Howard Hunt, President  
Rural Iowa Independent Telephone  
Association  
P. O. Box 10  
Dixon, Iowa 52745

David A. Kennedy, Director  
Educational Technology  
Dennis Small, Program Supervisor  
Educational Telecommunications  
Superintendent of Public Instruction  
P. O. Box 47200  
Olympia, WA 98504-7200

Anne Wendler  
Consultant-Lincoln Trail Libraries System  
1704 W. Interstate Drive  
Champaign, Illinois 61821

Eric B. Witte  
Assistant General Counsel  
Missouri Public Service Commission  
P. O. Box 360  
Jefferson City, Missouri 65102

Gina Harrison  
Director-Federal Regulatory Relations  
Pacific Telesis  
1275 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Howard D. Polsky  
Robert A. Mansbach  
COMSAT Corporation  
COMSAT International Communications  
6560 Rock Spring Drive  
Bethesda, MD 20817

Donna A. DiMartino  
Richard A. Askoff  
National Exchange Carrier Association,  
Inc.  
100 South Jefferson Road  
Whippany, N. J. 07981

Michael J. Karson  
Ameritech  
Room 4H88  
2000 West Ameritech Center Drive  
Hoffman Estates, IL 60196-1025

Roger Hamilton, Ron Eachus,  
Joan H. Smith  
Oregon Public Utility Commission  
550 Capitol Street, N.E.  
Salem, OR 97310-1380

Ronald Dunn, President  
Information Industry Association  
1625 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Andrew D. Lipman  
Mark Sievers  
MFS Communications Company, Inc.  
Swidler & Berlin, Chartered  
3000 K Street, N.W., Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20007

Robert M. Lynch, Durwad D. Dupre, Michael  
J. Zpevak, Darryl W. Howard  
Southwestern Bell Telephone Company  
One Bell Center, Suite 3524  
St. Louis, Missouri 63101

Joseph Di Bella  
NYNEX Telephone Companies  
1300 I Street, N.W.  
Suite 400 West  
Washington, D.C. 20005

David Price, President  
California Library Association  
717 K Street, Suite 300  
Sacramento, CA 95814-3477

Charles C. Hunter  
Telecommunications Resellers Association  
Hunter & Mow, P.C.  
1620 I Street, N.W., Suite 701  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Rodney L. Joyce, Edwin N. Lavergne,  
J. Thomas Nolan  
The Interactive Services Association  
Ginsburg, Feldman & Bress, Chartered  
1250 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

J. Maurice Travillian  
Assistant State Superintendent for  
Libraries  
Division of Library and Services  
Maryland State Department of Education  
200 W. Baltimore Street  
Baltimore, MD 21201

B.B. Knowles, Director  
Utilities Division  
Georgia Public Service Commission  
244 Washington Street, S.W.  
Atlanta, GA 30334-5701

Kathleen F. O'Reilly  
Attorney at Law  
414 "A" Street, Southeast  
Washington, D.C. 20003

Frank J. Gumper, Vice President  
Federal Regulatory Planning  
NYNEX  
1300 I Street, N.W.  
Suite 400 West  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dennis L. Bybee, Ph.D  
Access to Communications for Education  
Coalition  
International Society for Technology in  
Education  
USA National Office  
P. O. Box 4437  
Alexandria, VA 22303

Daniel L. Brenner, Neal M. Goldberg,  
David L. Nicoll  
National Cable Television Association  
1724 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Richard McKenna, HQE03J36  
GTE Service Corporation  
P. O. Box 152092  
Irving, TX 75015-2092

Dr. Edward H. Salmon, Commissioner  
State of New Jersey  
Board of Public Utilities  
Trenton, N.J. 08625-0350

Bob Rowe, Commissioner  
Montana Public Service Commission  
1701 Prospect Avenue  
P. O. Box 202601  
Helena, Montana 59620-2601

Paul Rodgers, Charles D. Gray  
National Association of Regulatory Utility  
Commissioners  
1201 Constitution Avenue, Suite 1102  
P. O. Box 684  
Washington, D.C. 20044

Richard W. Riley  
Secretary of Education  
600 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20202-0100

Michael J. Shortley III  
Frontier Corporation  
180 South Clinton Avenue  
Rochester, New York 14646

Gene DeJordy, Esq.  
Christopher Johnson  
Western Wireless Corporation  
2001 NW Sammamish Road  
#100  
Issaquah, WA 98027-8940

Virginia J. Taylor  
Richard A. Elbrecht  
California Department of Consumer Affairs  
400 R Street, Suite 3090  
Sacramento, CA 95814-6200

David Pierce, President  
American Association of Community Colleges  
Ray Taylor, President  
Association of Community College Trustees  
One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 410  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Charles H. Kennedy  
Western Alliance  
Morrison & Foerster, LLP  
2000 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 5500  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Don Gilbert, Senior Vice President  
Cathy Hotka, Vice President  
National Retail Federation  
325 7th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Maureen A. Scott  
Assistant Counsel  
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission  
P. O. Box 3265  
Harrisburg, PA 17105-3265

Gary Meissner, Director of MIS  
Eugene Stovall, Telecommunications  
Consultant  
Oakland Unified School District  
MIS Department  
1025 - Second Avenue  
Oakland, CA 94606

Jeanne Hurley Simon  
NCLIS Chairperson  
1110 Vermont Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 820  
Washington, D.C. 20005-3522

Ronald K. Greenhalgh  
Chief Engineer  
National Rural Electric Cooperative  
Association  
4301 Wilson Blvd.  
Arlington, VA 22203-1860

Nicholas P. Miller, William Malone,  
Matthre C. Ames, Joint Commenters  
Miller, Canfield, Paddock and  
Stone, P.L.C.  
1225 Nineteenth Street, N.W.  
Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20036-2420

Joan Mandeville  
Montana Telephone Association  
P. O. Box 2166  
Great Falls, MT 59403

Curtis T. White, Managing Partner  
Allied Associated Partners, LP  
Geld Information Systems  
4201 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 402  
Washington, D.C. 20008-1158

Mitchell Sprague, Kenneth Matheson, Doris  
Hammer  
Mendocino Unified School District  
P. O. Box 1154  
Mendocino, CA 95460

Amy E. Dougherty  
Kentucky Public Service Commission  
Post Office Box 615  
Frankfort, Kentucky 40602

Adam Turner  
Consultant to the Resident  
Representative Commonwealth of the  
Northern Marianas  
2121 R Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20006

Carolyn Purcell  
Executive Director  
Department of Information Resources  
Post Office Box 13564  
Austin, Texas 78711-3564

Anne U. MacClintock  
Vice President-Regulator Affairs  
and Public Policy  
Southern New England Telephone Co.  
227 Church Street  
New Haven Connecticut 06510

Kenneth T. Burchett  
Vice President  
GVNW, Inc.  
Post Office Box 230399  
Portland, Oregon 97281

Deborah C. Costlow  
Treg Tremont  
Independent Cable & Tele. Association  
Winston & Strawn  
1400 L Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005

Richard A. Finnigan  
Oregon Independent Telephone Assoc.  
Washington Independent Tele. Assoc.  
2405 Evergreen Park Drive, SW  
Suite B-1  
Olympia, Washington 98502

Mario E. Goderich  
Cable Television Coordinator  
Consumer Services Department  
Metropolitan Dade County  
140 West Flagler Street, Room 901  
Miami, Florida 33130

Robert C. Heterick, Jr., President  
Educom  
Suite 600  
1112 16th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Ann Lesser  
Warren Library Association  
205 Market Street  
Warren, Pennsylvania 16365

David L. Meier  
Director-Legislative & Regulatory  
Planning  
Cincinnati Bell Telephone  
Post Office Box 2301  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45201-2301

Monroe E. Price  
Professor of Law  
Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law  
Brookdale Center  
55 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10003

Carol C. Henderson  
Executive Director, ALA Washington  
Office  
American Library Association  
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 403  
Washington, DC 20004

Margo Crist  
Chair, Committee on NII/Telecom  
Michigan Library Association  
University of Michigan  
818 Hatcher South  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1205

Lisa Boehley  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW, Room 8605  
Washington, DC 20554

Deonne Bruning  
Nebraska Public Service Commission  
300 The Atrium  
1200 N Street  
Post Office Box 94927  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-4927

James Casserly  
Federal Communications Commission  
Office of Commissioner Ness  
1919 M Street, Room 832  
Washington, DC 20554

John Clark  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8619  
Washington, DC 20554

Bryan Clopton  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street NW  
Room 8615  
Washington, DC 20554

Irene Flannery  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8922  
Washington, DC 20554

Emily Hoffnar, Federal Staff Chair  
Federal Communications Commission  
Accounting & Audits Division  
Universal Service Branch  
2100 M Street, NW, Room 8617  
Washington, DC 20554

L. Charles Keller  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8918  
Washington, DC 20554

David Krech  
Federal Communications Commission  
2025 M Street, NW  
Room 7130  
Washington, DC 20554

Debra M. Kriete  
Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission  
Post Office Box 3265  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17105-3265



Robert Loube  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8914  
Washington, DC 20554

Tejal Mehta  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8625  
Washington, DC 20554

John Nakahata  
Federal Communications Commission  
Office of the Chairman  
1919 M Street, NW  
Room 814  
Washington, DC 20554

Tom Wilson  
Washington Utilities & Transportation  
Commission  
1300 South Evergreen Park Drive SW  
Olympia, Washington 98504

Kimberly Parker  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street NW  
Room 8609  
Washington, DC 20554

Barry Payne  
Indiana Office of the Consumer Counsel  
100 North Senate Avenue  
Room N501  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-2208

Richard Smith  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8605  
Washington, DC 20554

Lori Wright  
Federal Communications Commission  
2100 M Street, NW  
Room 8603  
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable James H. Quello  
Commissioner  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N.W., Room 802  
Washington, DC 20554

Tom Boasberg  
Federal Communications Commission  
Office of the Chairman  
1919 M Street, N.W., Room 814  
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable David Baker  
Commissioner  
Georgia Public Service Commission  
244 Washington Street, S.W.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334-5701

Rowland Curry  
Texas Public Utility Commission  
1701 North Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701

Kathleen Franco  
Federal Communications Commission  
Commissioner Chong's Office  
1919 M Street, N.W. - Room 844  
Washington, DC 20554

Thor Nelson  
Colorado Office of Consumer Counsel  
1580 Logan Street - Suite 610  
Denver, Colorado 80203

Paul Gallant  
Commissioner Quello's Office  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, N.W. - Room 802  
Washington, DC 20554

Timothy Peterson  
Deputy Division Chief  
Federal Communications Commission  
Accounting & Audits Division  
2100 M Street, N.W. - Room 8613  
Washington, DC 20554

Lori Kenyon  
Alaska Public Utilities Commission  
1016 West Sixth Avenue - Suite 400  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Kevin Schwenzfeier  
New York State Department of Public  
Service  
3 Empire State Plaza  
Albany, New York 12223

Tiane Sommer  
Georgia Public Service Commission  
244 Washington Street, N.W.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334-5701

Sheryl Todd  
Federal Communications Commission  
Auditing & Audits Division  
Universal Service Branch  
2100 M Street, N.W. - Room 8611  
Washington, DC 20554

International Transcription Service  
1231 20th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

The Honorable Harold Furchtgott-Roth  
Commissioner  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, NW, Room 802  
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Gloria Tristano  
Commissioner  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, NW, Room 826  
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Patrick H. Wood, III  
Chairman  
Texas Public Utility Commission  
1701 North Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701

Ann Dean  
Maryland Public Service Commission  
16th Floor, 6 Saint Paul Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21202-6806

Kevin Martin  
Federal Communications Commission  
Commissioner Furchtgott-Roth's Office  
1919 M Street, Room 802  
Washington, DC 20554

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William E. Kennard, General Counsel  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, NW, Room 614  
Washington, DC 20554

Nancy C. Garrison  
Catherine O'Sullivan  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Room 3224  
Washington, DC 20530-001

Thomas F. O'Neil, III  
William Single, IV  
MCI Telecommunications Corporation  
1133 Nineteenth Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Donald B. Verrilli, Jr.  
Jenner & Block  
601 Thirteenth Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005

Federal Communications Commission  
Competitive Pricing Division (2 CYS)  
Common Carrier Bureau  
1919 M Street, NW, Room 518  
Washington, DC 20554

Lyman C. Welch  
190 S. LaSalle Street  
#3100  
Chicago, Illinois 60603

Public Utility Commission of Oregon  
550 Capitol Street, NE  
Salem, Oregon 97310-1380

Public Utility Commission of Texas  
Post Office Box 13326  
Austin, Texas 78711-3326

Scott J. Rubin, Esquire  
Pennsylvania Internet Service  
Providers  
3 Lost Creek Drive  
Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania 17870

Lawrence D. Crocker, III  
Public Service Commission of the  
District of Columbia  
717 14th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005

Steven G. Sanders - President  
Northern Arkansas Telephone  
Company, Inc.  
301 East Main Street  
Flippin, Arkansas 72634

Edward Hayes, Jr., Esquire  
1155 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Third Floor  
Washington, DC 20036

Daniel Weitzner  
Alan B. Davidson  
Center for Democracy & Technology  
1634 Eye Street, NW, Suite 1100  
Washington, DC 20006

Joseph S. Paykel  
Andrew Jay Schwartzman  
Media Access Project  
1707 L Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036

Jack Krumholtz  
Law & Corporate Affairs Department  
Microsoft Corporation, Suite 600  
5335 Wisconsin Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20015

Thomas K. Crowe  
Michael B. Adams  
David H. Schwartz  
Law Offices of Thomas K. Crowe, PC  
2300 M Street, NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20037

Rachel J. Rothstein  
Cable & Wireless, Inc.  
8219 Leesburg Pike  
Vienna, Virginia 22182

William W. Burrington  
Jill Lesser  
America Online, Inc.  
1101 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036

Joanne Salvatore Bochis  
Perry S. Goldscheim  
National Exchange Carrier Assoc.  
100 South Jefferson Road  
Whippany, New Jersey 07981

Ozarks Technical Community College  
Post Office Box 5958  
Springfield, Missouri 65801

Charles D. Gray  
James Bradford Ramsay  
National Association of Regulatory  
Utility Commissioners  
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, Suite 603  
Washington, DC 20004

Michael S. Pabian  
Larry A. Peck  
Ameritech  
2000 West Ameritech Center Drive  
Room 4H82  
Hoffman Estates, Illinois 60196-1025

F. Stephen Lamb  
TCA, Inc.  
3617 Betty Drive, Suite 1  
Colorado Spgs., Colorado 80917-5909

Scott L. Smith, Vice President  
Alaska Telephone Association  
4341 B Street, Suite 304  
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

Betty D. Montgomery  
Steven T. Nourse  
Attorney General of Ohio  
Public Utilities Section  
180 East Broad Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-3793

Cindy Z. Schonhaut  
ICG Telecom Group, Inc.  
9605 East Maroon Circle  
Englewood, Colorado 80112

Ronald J. Binz  
Debra R. Berlyn  
John Windhausen, Jr.  
Competition Policy Institute  
1156 15th Street, NW, Suite 310  
Washington, DC 20005

Albert H. Kramer  
Dickstein Shapiro Morin &  
Oshinsky, LLP  
2101 L Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20037-1526

Kathy L. Shobert  
General Communication, Inc.  
901 15th Street, NW, Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20005

Richard J. Heitmann  
WorldCom, Inc.  
515 East Amite  
Jackson, Mississippi 39201-2702

Alex J. Harris  
WorldCom, Inc.  
33 Whitehall Street, 15th Floor  
New York, New York 10004

Peter A. Rohrbach  
David L. Sieradzki  
F. William Lebeau  
Hogan & Hartson, LLP  
555 13th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20004-1109

Wayne V. Black  
C. Douglas Jarrett  
Keller & Heckman, LLP  
1001 G Street, NW  
Suite 500 West  
Washington, DC 20001

Coleen Boothby/James S. Blaszak  
Kevin S. Dilallo/Sasha Field  
Levine Blaszak Block & Boothby  
1300 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036

Genevieve Morelli  
Competitive Telecommunications  
Association  
1900 M Street, NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20036

Edward Shakin  
Bell Atlantic Telephone Co.  
1320 North Court House Road  
8th Floor  
Arlington, Virginia 22201

Joseph Dibella  
Nynex Telephone Companies  
1300 I Street, NW  
Suite 400 West  
Washington, DC 20005

Mary McDermott/Linda Kent  
Keith Townsend/Hance Haney  
United States Telephone Assoc.  
1401 H Street, NW, Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20005

Fleishman & Walsh, LLP  
1400 Sixteenth Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Gary L. Mann  
IXC Long Distance, Inc.  
98 San Jacinto, Suite 700  
Austin, Texas 78701

Gene C. Schaerr  
David L. Lawson  
Scott M. Bohannon  
AT&T Corporation  
1722 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20006

Robert M. McDowell  
Brian A. Cute  
Helein & Associates, PC  
8180 Greensboro Drive, Suite 700  
McLean, Virginia 22102

Thomas E. Taylor  
Christopher J. Wilson  
Frost & Jacobs  
2500 PNC Center  
201 East Fifth Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

Robert B. McKenna  
Richard A. Karre  
Coleen M. Egan Helmreich  
U S West, Inc.  
1020 19th Street, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036

Joe D. Edge  
Tina M. Pidgeon  
Drinker Biddle & Reath  
901 15th Street, NW, Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20005

Marlin D. Ard  
Nancy C. Woolf  
Pacific Telesis Group  
140 New Montgomery Street  
San Francisco, California 94105

Margaret E. Garber  
Pacific Telesis Group  
1275 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Emily C. Hewitt  
GSA  
18th & F Streets, NW, Room 4002  
Washington, DC 20405

Office of the Judge Advocate General  
U.S. Army Litigation Center  
901 North Stuart Street, Suite 713  
Arlington, Virginia 22202-1837

John Rother, Esquire  
American Association of Retired  
Persons  
601 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20049

James Love  
Consumer Project on Technology  
Post Office Box 19367  
Washington, DC 20036

David J. Newburger  
Newburger & Vossmeier  
One Metropolitan Square, Suite 2400  
St. Louis, Missouri 63102

Jack Shreve  
Office of Public Counsel  
111 West Madison Street, Room 812  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1400



Mike Travieso  
Office of People's Counsel  
6th St. Paul Street, Suite 2102  
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Irwin A. Popowsky  
Office of Consumer Advocate  
1425 Strawberry Square  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

James Maret  
Office of Consumer Advocate  
Lucas State Office Building  
4th Floor  
Des Moines, Iowa 50319

Rob Manifold  
Assistant Attorney General  
900 4th Avenue, Suite 2000  
Seattle, Washington 98164

Regina Costa  
Toward Utility Rate Normalization  
625 Polk Street, Suite 403  
San Francisco, California 94102

Eric Swanson  
Office of Attorney General  
445 Minnesota Street  
Suite 1200 WCL Tower  
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101-2130

Anne Becker  
Office of Utility Consumer  
Counselor  
100 North Senate Avenue, Rm. N501  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-2208

Peter Arth, Jr./Lionel B. Wilson  
Mary Mack Adu/Helen M. Mickiewicz  
California PUC  
505 Van Ness Avenue  
San Francisco, California 94102

Mary Newmeyer  
Alabama Public Service Commission  
Post Office Box 991  
Montgomery, Alabama 36101

Laurie Pappas  
Office of Public Utility Counsel  
1701 N. Congress Avenue, 9-180  
Post Office Box 12397  
Austin, Texas 78711-2397

R. Michael Senkowski  
Jeffrey S. Linder  
Gregory J. Vogt  
Wiley Rein & Fielding  
1776 K Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20006

Ward W. Wueste  
Gail L. Polivy  
GTE Service Corporation  
1850 M Street, NW  
Suite 1200  
Washington, DC 20036

Richard Hemstad  
William R. Gillis  
Washington Utilities &  
Transportation Commission  
1300 S. Evergreen Park Drive  
Olympia, Washington 98504-7250

Michael T. Skrivan  
Harris Skrivan & Associates LLC  
8801 South Yale, Suite 220  
Tulsa, Oklahoma 74137

Pamela J. Riley  
Airtouch Communications, Inc.  
One California Street, 9th Floor  
San Francisco, California 94111

Mark J. Golden  
Robert L. Hoggarth  
Nary Madigan  
Personal Communications Industry  
Association  
500 Montgomery Street, Suite 700  
Alexandria, Virginia 22214-1561

Christopher W. Savage  
Cole Raywid & Braverman, LLP  
1919 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20006

Teresa Marrero  
Teleport Communications Group, Inc.  
Two Teleport Drive  
Staten Island, New York 10311

Brian Conboy/Thomas Jones  
Gunnar Halley  
Willkie Farr & Gallagher  
Three Lafayette Center  
1155 21st Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Randall B. Lowe  
Piper & Marbury, LLP  
1200 19th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

John J. List  
Rural Telephone Finance Cooperative  
2201 Cooperative Way  
Herndon, Virginia 20171

Benjamin H. Dickens, Jr.  
Gerard J. Duffy  
Blooston Mordkofsky Jackson &  
Dickens  
2120 L Street NW, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20037

David A. Irwin  
Tara S. Becht  
Irwin Campbell & Tannenwald, PC  
1739 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20036-3101

Diane Smith  
Carolyn C. Hill  
Alltel Corporate Services, Inc.  
655 15th Street NW  
Suite 220  
Washington, DC 20005-5701

Kent Larsen  
Cathey Hutton & Associates  
2711 LBJ Freeway, Suite 560  
Dallas, Texas 75234

Clint Frederick  
Frederick & Warinner, LLC  
10901 West 84th Terrance, Suite 101  
Lenexa, Kansas 66214-1631

George Petrutsas  
Paul J. Feldman  
Fletcher Heald & Hildreth, PLC  
1300 North 17th Street, 11th Floor  
Rosslyn, Virginia 22209

Jeffrey F. Beck  
Jillisa Bonfman  
Beck & Ackerman  
Four Embarcadaro Center, Suite 760  
San Francisco, California 94111

Robert A. Mazer  
Albert Shuldiner  
Vinson & Elkins  
1455 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004-1008

Randolph J. May  
Bonding Yee  
Sutherland Asbill & Brennan  
1275 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004-2404

Stephen G. Kraskin  
Sylvia Lesse  
Thomas J. Moorman  
Kraskin & Lesse  
2120 L Street NW, Suite 530  
Washington, DC 20037

Jack Krumholtz  
Microsoft Corporation  
5335 Wisconsin Avenue, NW  
Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20015

Stanley M. Gorinson  
William H. Davenport  
Preston Gates Ellis & Rouvelas Meeds  
1735 New York Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20006

Robert D. Collet/Barbara A. Dooley  
Ronald L. Plessner/Mark J. O'Connor  
James J. Halpert  
Piper & Marbury, LLP  
1200 19th Street, NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036

Henry D. Levine  
Laura F.H. McDonald  
Levine Blaszk Block & Boothby  
1300 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036

Gregory M. Casey  
Douglas W. Kinkoph  
LCI International Corp., Inc.  
8180 Greensboro Drive, Suite 800  
McLean, Virginia 22102

Terry Michael Banks  
ICG Telecom Group  
1303 Sawbridge Way  
Reston, Virginia 22094

Christopher Klein  
Tennessee Regulatory Authority Staff  
460 James Robertson Parkway  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243-0505

David S.J. Brown  
E. Molley Leahy  
Newspaper Association of America  
529 14th Street, NW  
Suite 440  
Washington, DC 20045

Lesla Lehtonen  
California Cable Television Assoc.  
4341 Piedmont Avenue  
Oakland, California 94611

James Brennan  
NYSENET, Inc.  
Rensselaer Technology Park  
Troy, New York 12180-7698

W. Fred Seigneur  
Sonetech, Inc.  
109 Kale Avenue  
Sterling, Virginia 20164

David J. Newburger  
Newburger & Vossmeier  
One Metropolitan Square  
Suite 2400  
St. Louis, Missouri 63102

Alex J. Harris  
WorldCom, Inc.  
33 Whitehall Street  
15th Floor  
New York, New York 10004

Messrs. Rohrbach, Steradzki & LeBeau  
Hogan & Hartson, LLP  
555 13th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20004-1109

Kansas Corporation Commission  
1500 SW Arrowhead Road  
Topeka, Kansas 66604-4027

Federal Communications Commission  
Industry Analysis Division  
Common Carrier Bureau Room 534  
1919 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20554

James Schlichting  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street NW, Room 518  
Washington, DC 20554

John C. Smith  
Aeronautical Radio, Inc.  
2551 Riva Road  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Messrs. Pierson, Metzger & Minster  
Pierson & Tuttle  
1200 19th Street, NW, Suite 607  
Washington, DC 20036

M. Robert Sutherland  
BellSouth Telecommunications, Inc.  
Suite 1700  
1155 Peachtree Street, NW  
Atlanta, Georgia 30309-3610

Messrs. Lampert, Harvie & Valentino  
Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky  
and Popeo, PC  
701 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20004

Walter G. Bolter, PhD.  
Bethesda Research Institute, Ltd.  
Post Office Box 4044  
St. Augustine, Mflorida 32085

Allan J. Arlow  
Computer & Communications Industry  
Association  
666 11th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001

Charles A. Zielinski  
Rogers & Wells  
607 14th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005

James E. Keith  
Ambox Incorporated  
6040 Telephone Road  
Houston, Texas 77087

Barry Gorsun  
Summa Four, Inc.  
25 Sun Dial Avenue  
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

Charles W. Trippe  
Ampro Corporation  
525 John Rodes Boulevard  
Melbourne, Florida 32934

Joseph A. Lahoud  
LC Technologies, Inc.  
9455 Silver King Court  
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

Paul Pandian  
Axes Technologies, Inc.  
3333 Earhart  
Carrollton, Texas 32230

Fred Van Veen  
Teradyne, Inc.  
321 Harrison Avenue  
Boston, Massachusetts 02118

James B. Wood  
Inovonics, Inc.  
1304 Sair Avenue  
Santa Cruz, California 95060

Frank Tripi  
Perception Technology Corporation  
40 Shawsut Road  
Canton, Maryland 02021

L. Paul Knoerzer  
OK Champion Corporation  
Post Office Box 585  
Hammon, Indiana 46320

John E. Lingo, Jr.  
Lingo, Inc.  
Post Office Box 1237  
Camden, New Jersey 08105

William H. Combs, III  
Tamaqua Cable Products Corporation  
300 Willow Street  
Schuylkill Haven, Pennsylvania 17972

Al W. Wokas  
Rhetorex, Inc.  
151 Albright Way  
Los Gatos, California 95030-1801

George Sollman  
Centigram Communications Corp.  
91 East Tazman Drive  
San Jose, California 95134

Stephen B. Kaufman  
Healthtech Services Corporation  
255 Revere Drive, Suite 101  
Northbrook, Illinois 60062

David L. Deming  
Senecom Voice Processing Systems  
6 Blossomwood Court  
St. Louis, Missouri 63033-5202

Lucile M. Moore  
Intellect, Inc.  
1100 Executive Drive  
Richardson, Texas 75081

Tenley A. Carp  
Government Services Administration  
18th and F Streets, NW  
Room 40002  
Washington, DC 20405

Emily C. Hewitt  
Government Services Administration  
18th and F Streets, NW  
Room 40002  
Washington, DC 20405

Vincent L. Crivella  
Michael J. Ettner  
GSA, Personal Property Division  
18th and F Street, NW  
Room 40002  
Washington, DC 20405

Robert A. Mazer  
Nixon, Hargrave, Devans & Doyle  
One Thomas Circle, NW  
Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20005

David Cosson  
National Telephone Cooperative  
Association  
2626 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Messrs. Tuthill & Bogy  
Pacific Bell & Nevada Bell  
140 New Montgomery Street  
Room 1530-A  
San Francisco, California 94105

Messrs. Wurtz & Garber  
Pacific Bell & Nevada Bell  
1275 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Messrs. Mates & Rubenstein  
Pacific Bell & Nevada Bell  
140 Montgomery Street  
Room 1522-A  
San Francisco, California 94105

Paul B. Jones  
Janis A. Stahlhut  
Time Warner Communications  
300 First Stamford Place  
Stamford, Connecticut 06902-6732



Lawrence P. Keller  
Cathey Hutton & Associates, Inc.  
330 Holcomb Bridge Road  
Suite 286  
Norcross, Georgia 30092

Messrs. Rohrbach & Oliver  
Hogan & Hartson  
Columbia Square  
555 13th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20004-1109

Dr. Jerome R. Ellig  
Center for Market Processes  
4084 University Drive  
Suite 208  
Fairfax, Virginia 22030

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno  
Department of Justice  
10th Street & Constitution Avenue NW  
Room 4400  
Washington, DC 20530

Janice Miles  
Federal Communications Commission  
Policy & Program Planning Division  
1919 M Street, NW  
Room 544  
Washington, DC 20554

Messrs. Kennedy, Phillips & Morris  
Dow Lohnes & Albertson  
1255 23rd Street, NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20037

Jody B. Burton  
GSA, Congressional & Inter-  
governmental Affairs  
Personal Property Division  
18th & F Streets, NW, Room 4002  
Washington, DC 20405

Daniel Kelley  
Hatfield Associates, Inc.  
737 29th Street, Suite 200  
Boulder, Colorado 80303

R. Michael Senkowski  
Wiley Rein & Fielding  
1776 K Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20006

Messrs. Sloan & Fruchterman  
LDDS WorldCom  
1120 Connecticut Avenue NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036

Nancy C. Woolf  
Pacific Bell & Nevada Bell  
140 New Montgomery Street, Room 1523  
San Francisco, California 94105

John E. Ingle  
Office of General Counsel  
Deputy Associate General Counsel-  
Litigation  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, NW, Room 602  
Washington, DC 20554